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ABSTRACT

The findings of an ethnographic study of schooling and work in a small rural community in the Adirondack mountains of upstate New York are reported. More than half the school children in the community live in poverty. Research explores the relationships between patterns of adult work and the schooling of children, and between schooled and non-schooled uses of literacy. Discussion focuses on one aspect of the disjuncture between home and school, the role of standards and requirements. More than 75 interviews were conducted over a 3-year period with students, teachers, parents, school administrators, and community members. Six families were visited at home. Classroom observations were made, and information was collected from archival and government sources. Most families seem to see the school as a place for important ceremonies and social events, but not as a place to strive for economic security or social mobility. There are many conflicts between students and teachers, teachers and parents, and families and school administration. Ideally, the setting of standards and requirements involves a tacit agreement between those who set them and those who try to satisfy them that such measures probably represent bona fide qualifications for goal attainment. In the community observed, different views of standards and requirements made fertile ground for conflict. The social and economic reasons for the differences are discussed. (SLD)

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SCHOOLING AND WORK: THE ROLE OF STANDARDS AND REQUIREMENTS

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SCHOOLING AND WORK:
THE ROLE OF STANDARDS AND REQUIREMENTS

PART I PRESENTING THE DATA

Introduction

This paper reports on findings of an ethnographic study of schooling and work in a small rural community in the Adirondack mountains of upstate New York. The research explores the relationships between patterns of adult work and the schooling of children, and between schooled and non-schooled uses of literacy. Several areas of disjuncture between schooling and the community context in which it exists emerged from the data. The disparity between the expectations and demands of schooling and the beliefs and practices of lower-class families and communities is not simply a "gap" to be closed through school reform. It is, rather, the breach wherein a whole new set of relations must be considered. Discussion here will focus on one aspect of the disjuncture between home and school, the role of standards and requirements.

Most of the public debate regarding educational standards and requirements is concerned simply with setting levels of achievement (test scores, performance objectives) or attainment (years or levels completed). Shall we raise or lower? We need higher standards! "We must be sure to require very high standards of performance from our poorest students as well as the

academically talented or more advantaged." So goes the rhetoric. This narrow focus on quantifiable levels of performance tends to obscure the real and complex problem of students "at risk," whose life experience tends to go against the achievement ideology of schooling, a system of external requirements, based on standards of performance, competition, and credentials.

Living in poverty creates a situation where the exigencies of daily life often foil attempts to meet other requirements (Fitchen, 1991), and this phenomenon is a problem which can lead to both school failure and failure in the job market. It can be better understood by looking at the relational nature of the definitions of standards and requirements, by considering the shared experience of many community members in the workplace, and by analyzing the significance of this area of disjuncture for the schooling of children.

Background: The Study

The study grew out of several years of living and teaching in a town we call Somerville, where more than half the school children are living in poverty. It was a response to a developing concern that conventional wisdom and public policy regarding education of "at risk" or disadvantaged children fail to take into account powerful sociocultural and economic influences which dominate the development of attitudes and

constrain efforts at school achievement. The relationships between family, community, work, and schooling are complex and are based on values and assumptions which, in some places, are vastly different from widely accepted mainstream views. This inquiry demanded data situated within the particular view of reality supported by local experience and understandings.

The Somerville case study community is made up of neither white collar nor traditional factory blue collar workers, but represents, rather, a third type of work community, a mixture of formal and informal sector workers. Most of the local people work in low paying jobs, many of them seasonal, and many combine jobs in what Halperin (1990) calls "multiple livelihood strategies." Often wage labor is combined with transfer payments, informal arrangements with family and neighbors, and living off the land as a way of providing for families. Fifty-two percent of the children in the local K - 8 school are eligible for free or reduced lunch, which indicates that their family incomes fall below the federal poverty guidelines. (Approximate monthly income for a family of four = $1450) The standard of living is low here, as evidenced by poor housing conditions, old cars in disrepair, and hand-me-downs being the most common clothes in school. Somerville students attend high school in a nearby small city, Williamstown, 18 miles away. Parents and other community members have frequent, positive contact with the local school, often centered around holiday festivities, athletic events and other non-academic functions.

The school is seen as an important place for community gatherings, an institution central to people's sense of belonging, but there is little obvious concern with academic achievement among the people of Somerville.

More than 75 interviews were conducted over a three-year period with local participants, including students, teachers, and school administrators, as well as former students, parents, community members, and local employers. These many conversations focused on the perceived relationship between schooling and work, and on the relationship between the literacies of the local community and of the school. Six families were visited in their homes, while other family conversations took place at school and at community social events. School officials made classrooms and school records accessible, and the researcher was in the school almost daily during the fieldwork phase. Observations were made in elementary classes, Chapter I remedial reading, and eighth grade Social Studies and English classes, including a five-week literature unit. Observations were also conducted at various school and community events, ceremonies, and meetings, such as graduations, holiday celebrations, faculty meetings, and the non-school classrooms of hunters' safety training and snowmobile safety training. Data were recorded using audio-tape and fieldnotes. Archival data were gathered from records at the local school and the high school, the county department of social services, the state department of economic development, and the local newspaper.

The Issue Emerges: Meeting Standards and Fulfilling Requirements

Most Somerville families seem to view the school as a place for important ceremonies and social events, but not as a place to strive for economic security or social mobility through academic achievement. The school is filled with parents and preschoolers on the day of the Halloween parade, on picture-taking day, and when Santa visits the elementary classes. Townspeople report a warm relationship with local school personnel in the social sense ("It's like one big family,") but there are also numerous accounts of conflict between students and teachers, teachers and parents, families and school administrators. Such conflicts exist over the whole range of grade levels and usually involve academic work, although occasionally extending to non-academic areas such as the sports program. The anger and frustration expressed by respondents toward those with whom they were in conflict began to show a pattern. At the root of such conflicts was a particular response to the expectation of meeting standards and fulfilling requirements.

High School Drop-outs

Frustration with the difficulty of meeting school requirements pervades the interviews with Somerville students who dropped out before completing high school. The following examples illustrate the perceptions of former students who feel that school failed to help them, and that the failure was based on their disagreement with administration over credits,

attendance, or course of study.

R.K. described his decision to quit school as the culmination of his inability to meet graduation requirements.

R.K.: They were screwing me around with credits like you wouldn't believe. (Tells of failing social studies and having to take 10th and 11th grade s.s. at the same time, failing again...) Then they said I wasn't going to graduate anyway. I would've had to go to summer school and again next fall just to take social studies. You know, here I am 20 years old and still in high school. I couldn't take it any more.

Failure to meet attendance requirements caused B.E. to be called into the principal's office at the high school. School officials tried to help him accept this responsibility by proposing a contract.

B.E.: They wanted me to sign this big agreement and I said, "No way!"(I asked about the agreement, proposed by the administration) - You know, that I would come on time, that I would "attend regularly," and that. I mean, I wasn't gonna sign no agreement, so I left school.

Attendance problems combined with coursework and credit requirements to create a situation where L.O. felt there was no way to succeed.

L.O.: I had an argument with the principal. He wouldn't let me drop accounting and I had missed seven weeks and the teacher said there was no way I could catch up, so I quit.

These kids, even in retrospect, have bewilderment in their voices as they discuss requirements placed on them by schools. They seem not to understand that requirements, by definition are required. They couldn't or didn't want to do these things and seem genuinely surprised (as well as angry) that the authorities

wouldn't let them go on without fulfilling requirements.

This discord carries over into the world of work. The same sort of indignation surfaced when R.K. and L.O. told about jobs they had left in conflict over requirements of the employer.

L.O.: They wanted me to work weekends and I didn't want to.

R.K.: They held your pay. Like if you finished work on a Friday, they wouldn't pay you 'til Monday, and I wanted my money for the weekend, so I quit.

Another respondent seemed pinched between standards for school and work as he blamed his current unemployment on the fact that the high school had forced him to fulfill an academic requirement at the expense of a vocational requirement.

Ang: They made me drop VoTec for English, so now I don't have state certification (in auto mechanics).

Their discussion of the requirements which got in their way reveals their sense that these are arbitrary standards, that those who impose them are regarded with disdain, and that only by leaving can one regain autonomy.

Student - Teacher Conflict

At the middle school level, student-teacher conflict often seems on the surface to be pretty much a clash of wills. The following portion of transcript is taken from a conversation between two middle school teachers about their frustrations in dealing with a particular group of eighth graders. It illustrates their perception that what holds these students back from school achievement is less an inability to do the work than

an unwillingness to complete the assignments according to the requirements specified by the teacher. At issue here are task requirements, in contrast to the more formal standards for graduation.

Ms. P.: This is a big composition and they've had plenty of time and you wouldn't believe the stuff they're trying to hand in. I mean most of the time I'm not at all picky, but for these important ones I'm going to be picky. I told them several times I'm not taking pencil, and I'm not taking papers that are a mess. If they make a mistake I told them to cross it out with a single line. Well, (names a few students) are still handing it in in pencil. I told R., " This looks like a good job and it's neat, but I'm not accepting pencil." This is the third time he redid it, and he said, I don't do Spanish in pen." So I said, "I don't accept compositions in pencil. Now it's up to you. This counts as two grades." And he said, "I'm not doing it again." The biggest problem is getting them to understand that there's a certain way I want it done and do it that way.

Ms. M.: The other day we were working on (a writing assignment) and C. was just sitting there doing nothing, so when I reminded her to get to work, she said, "I hate doing this. We had to do this last year and I hated it then too." I wish we could get across to them that sometimes you just have to do the work that is assigned, and whether you like it or not has nothing to do with it.

These teachers believe that if their students are to be successful later on they must learn that requirements have to be fulfilled just because they are required, independent of actual necessity or personal preference.

Parent - Teacher Conflict

An account of parent involvement with a first grade project reveals the same pattern. The first grade teacher told about their recently completed animal unit, during which students learned about various classes of animals and some pets were brought to school by parents for demonstration to the class.

There were two main problems. First, she tried to schedule the arrival of pets at specific times to minimize class disruption.

Ms. D.: You know this gets the kids really going, so I try to have it right before we go home, and do all their end of the day chores first so they don't go completely wild.

On several occasions, parents who had arranged to bring pets failed to show up as planned, leaving the teacher "holding the bag." Further, Ms. D. said they were unable to understand why it wouldn't be just as good if they brought the pet in at any other time when they could make it.

The second problem involved materials to be sent in from home for the children to use in a project comparing two classes of animals.

Ms. D.: I sent a letter home asking them to send in magazine pictures of two animals from different groups, like mammals, reptiles, birds, and I told what those categories were, gave examples and so forth (so kids could cut and paste pairs of animals and compare mammal with bird, bird with reptile, etc.). Some sent in photographs with notes not to cut or destroy, some (most frequent mistake) sent pairs of animals from the same group - a deer and a bear, a dog and a horse. I explained it so carefully, what more can I do? They don't cooperate and then you can't do the project - there's no contrast - "This is a mammal; it has fur...and, *this* is a mammal." Sometimes you want to scream.

DB: About how many would you say sent in inappropriate responses?

Ms. D.: Out of 19, I'd say 12. They all hunt, so they certainly should know their animals.

DB: So, the parents are not following directions?

Ms.D.: (Laughs) It seems almost... defiant.

It is possible that the frequency of sending in two mammal

pictures indicated that local parents substituted a different requirement for that of classification (or, used a different standard - perhaps important animals, animals found locally, favorite animals). In any case, what these situations have in common is an apparent inability or unwillingness to understand and follow instructions or fulfill requirements in the way specified by the authority (teacher, administration, boss). While each instance might be subject to various interpretations, taken together, the plethora of examples indicates an undeniable pattern. The tendency of Somerville people to do things "their own way" with little regard for specified requirements of those in charge is a constant source of conflict. It is sometimes perceived as defiance, laziness, stubbornness, or stupidity. Concomitantly, insistence on fulfilling requirements and meeting standards is sometimes seen by local people as evidence of the stubbornness, inflexibility, and insensitivity of school and other authorities. One respondent, who claimed to have failed the GED test by one point, said, "I was one point below (the cutoff) and they wouldn't give it to me!" His indignation displays lack of understanding of fixed performance standards used as cut points and indicates his belief that there is subjective judgement involved, that they could have "given it to him," had they wanted to.

We began by looking at the conflict over high school graduation requirements, moved to the middle school level to look at student - teacher conflict, and this final example of parent -

teacher conflict shows how early the disjuncture comes into play. The kindergarten teacher told of an irate parent who telephoned her at home at 8:30 p.m. to complain about the fact that his son had been kept in from recess for a few minutes as a "reminder" to bring in a picture of himself for a project.

Ms.B.: They'd had a week and a half to bring it in. He said, "I don't have time to find a picture. I'm up to my elbows in dishes and my wife sprained her back, so I have to take care of her, and I don't want him punished for not bringing it in." I explained that it was for his reading assignment and that it had been over one and a half weeks, and he said, "I'm sick of your demands!" and slammed the phone down. I told (the principal) I didn't even get to say goodbye!

Even at the kindergarten level, school requirements were more than this particular family could deal with. The teacher maintained her sense of humor as she related the incident, but it was obvious that she had lost sleep over it. She said this was the beginning of learning responsibility and echoed the concern of the first grade teacher that if a child never brings in the required materials he can't participate in the project in the same way as the other kids and he will feel bad.

Ms.B.: Next year they're going to have spelling words, and later on they'll have more work, and he's got to learn responsibility. Plus, the parents don't do anything with him. They won't even read his library book. Now what's going to happen to this kid?

PART II ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Defining Standards and Requirements

Standard - An acknowledged (agreed upon) measure of comparison for quantitative or qualitative value; criterion. A degree or level of requirement, excellence, or attainment. Often 'standards' - a requirement of moral conduct: *maintains high standards in all his dealings*.

Requirement - Something that is required; necessity. Something obligatory; prerequisite.

Requirements can be broad and general, such as those for functional literacy, which are always debatable and subject to change (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Langer, 1987). They may be stated and specific, such as those for graduation and admissions. More subtly, there are also informal, sometimes unstated requirements such as those of parents for the conduct of their children, or those of a job for certain tools or materials. A standard then, might be thought of as the accepted measure of whatever is required.

The paradox of standards and requirements is this: They represent clearly delineated objective levels of qualification, while the concepts which give them meaning are highly relational.

In other words, what we think of as an extremely clear-cut aspect of our educational practice is built on such murky, shifting notions as success and necessity. In places like Somerville, where economic conditions dictate a life of "making do" with whatever resources are available, people have learned that not many things are truly "necessary."

Ideally, the setting of standards and the "requiring" of requirements usually involves a tacit agreement between those who set them and those who must try to satisfy them, that such measures probably represent bona fide qualifications for goal attainment. Lacking such agreement, the power differential between the two groups may be sufficient to ensure that those in the second group will still attempt to satisfy, provided they've bought into the idea that those in the first group will then grant access to the goal. For example, very young children will usually try to do anything the teacher asks simply to gain access to adult approval. Older students grudgingly take prerequisites which seem useless but which they believe they need in order to gain access to academic programs they want to follow. The arrangement falls apart when the goals and purposes of those expected to meet requirements are different from those imagined for them by the standard setters. In fact, given the well-documented concern of poor, working-class people with controlling their own time and efforts, there is immediate potential for conflict in their being asked to fulfill requirements set by "others." The result may be overt resistance (Gilmore, 1985;

Willis, 1977; MacLeod, 1987;) or simply a failure to comply.

The popular controversy over educational assessment is fueled by the lack of agreement on what performance standards should be, and the public discussion of standards and requirements is usually limited to talk about "raising and/or lowering." To focus the debate on quantifiable levels of educational performance is to miss the important point that, no matter how carefully we adjust the rules of the game, it's not really going to matter to people who are playing a different game. Put another way, the question of how to help "at risk" students with standards and requirements isn't served by debating quantity, levels of measurement. Rather, the issue is qualitative, and concerns the problem of mainstream, middle-class standards and requirements, set at any level, being imposed on non-mainstream, "at risk," populations. The real-life experience of Somerville people, largely shaped by the work patterns of the community, tends to be at odds with a system of external requirements, based on standards of performance, competition, and credentials, and on "single-minded" pursuit of education or career. Let us look at local patterns of work and the shaping of attitudes among Somerville families.

Standards and Requirements at Work

The Job Market and the Informal Economy

Important employers in the small cities near Somerville are

mills (leather, knitting, golf balls), utilities (power and telephone) and direct care facilities (one hospital, a huge network of facilities and homes for developmentally disabled adults, two prisons, and a drug rehabilitation prison-hospital). There are also some retail and grocery stores, gas stations, and restaurants. The only employment available without making the fifteen mile trip to the city is provided by the town itself, maintaining roads in winter and the municipal golf course in summer, by the local school, and by a small store which has expanded to include a marina business. Many local people are self-employed contractors who work at a variety of jobs from logging to carpentry, often doing odd jobs for the owners of summer camps in the area. ("There's always contracting work, no matter what.") Several sell merchandise out of their homes or trucks, from mail order jewelry and cosmetics to home-made craft items. There is also significant trade in seconds from the near-by knitting and leather mills, and toy factory. Work, in the Somerville context, is not synonymous with career, or even with year-round, full-time employment. In local understandings, work can be a loose association with a job once held, a succession of odd jobs, or the work of keeping the family going (cutting wood, repairing or adding on to the house, hunting, automotive repair). These latter forms of work are important, not only in a pragmatic sense for survival, but also as a significant source of pride and social identity (Fitchen). Besides part-time and seasonal wage-labor jobs, many people find they are best able to provide for

their families by combining various forms of informal work with social benefits. Where participation in the informal sector is a major part of the economic activity of a community, the features of that sector will influence the particular ways in which families and individuals position themselves with respect to authority and production, and it will shape their view of standards and requirements. Louis Ferman (1990) uses the term irregular, or informal economy to describe what our respondents refer to as work done "off the books," or, "under the table." Included in this category are activities ranging from production of goods and services to criminal enterprises. His discussion of the distinctions between the formal and informal sectors of the economy is helpful in understanding the influence participation in the informal sector may have on development of ideas and attitudes about work and schooling and about fulfilling requirements in communities such as Somerville, where such participation is extensive. While formal sector units are regulated and credentialed, informal units lack this legitimacy and have, therefore, less access to institutional capital and must minimize capital investment or obtain financial support from family and friends. Formal sector units require licensing, and emphasis is on standardization of performance with specific criteria to be fulfilled, but in the informal sector, standardization of performance is not a dominant norm. In the formal sector, internal organization is fixed and hierarchical and workers must certify their acquisition of skills and work

experience. Units in the informal economy stress flexible division of labor and non-hierarchical relationships, and worker credentials are not important. Indeed, since work opportunities are unpredictable, emphasis is placed on ability to adapt to unforseen contingencies. Time, money, and manpower are fixed and predictable in the formal sector, while in the informal sector these factors are indeterminate, flexible, and highly unpredictable.

In Somerville, a substantial part of the economic activity takes place in the informal sector, discussed below as independent contracting. This fits with the relatively flat social structure of work arrangements and disdain for credentialism discussed by Ferman. As we shall see, those formal sector jobs that are available do little to encourage buying into the mainstream notion of standards and requirements.

Getting a Job

Young people growing up in Somerville look to their parents and neighbors for future job possibilities. Their experience with requirements for entering the job market, even in the formal economic sector, is based on the low wage employment available locally. It is often the case that even a high school diploma isn't necessary and people generally believe that "you'll get the job if you know someone or if they like you." One adult respondent who had worked in the leather mills, pumped gas, and was currently a truck driver, offered some insights about job requirements and the importance of schooling. He makes the

distinction between the requirement of a high school diploma and its necessity.

R.G.: Oh yeah, you have to have it to get in at the mill. They ask you right on the application.

D.B.: But would you really need to be a high school graduate to do the job?

R.G.: No, nothing like that. They just put it on there...Unless you know somebody, then you'll get in.

Even as he acknowledges the requirement of a diploma, R.G. also reveals the pervasive and probably well-founded belief that getting jobs is more a matter of connections than of credentials. Indeed, almost all of the interviewees who had left school without earning a diploma said this had never caused them any trouble getting hired.

Local Employers

The perception that completing high school is not necessary and does little to prepare one for the world of work is shared by many employers. When asked about the relative importance of an applicant's high school transcript - grades, attendance record, graduation - those in a position to give jobs with several local business concerns indicated that schooling really didn't matter, at least not from an *achievement* standpoint.

Owner of Auto Dealership: Well, I'd hate to discriminate between the high school graduate and the non-graduate. A lot of times the non-graduate may be just as good a worker. 'Course if they didn't graduate for these other reasons (referring to earlier mention of dependability, responsibility) then that's another thing.

Hospital Recruiter: No, we don't require it (H.S.diploma). Skills

aren't enough. When it comes to performance deficiencies, it's 80% attitude, 20% skills. It's work ethic - type attributes we expect teachers to impart. We look for values, motivation, drive....

The owner of the dealership rejects the notion of a high school diploma as a worker's credential. In his view, the non-graduate may be just as good a worker. The recruiter concurs and indicates the relative importance of attitude and motivation, which, he says, are far more significant for success on the job than school-learned skills. Other local employers, including the owner of a fast food franchise and the telephone company recruiter agreed that attributes like dependability, positive attitude, and human relations skills were far more important than school credentials.

These same employers cited problems with attitude and motivation as the chief source of difficulty with new employees who were unable to hold jobs. Included in this category were regular, punctual attendance, calling in if not reporting, and willingness to carry out instructions of superiors. Even jobs with few prerequisites have basic standards and requirements which must be met to get along. In response to the hospital recruiter's stated expectation that teachers "impart work ethic - type attributes" to their students, a group of teachers pointed out that these are the same qualities required for school success and that they develop, or fail to, as a result of the home environment. In communities where people employ multiple livelihood strategies based on kinship networks and on

independent control of one's time and efforts, an affinity for such requirements cannot be taken for granted.

Independent Contracting

Much of the work done by Somerville residents comes through independent contracting of casual labor. Several men do tree work, snow removal, repairs, etc. Women sell crafts they've made, and men sell merchandise from the mills. These are jobs with no entrance requirements and for which the only necessities are raw materials and some tools, and sometimes a pick-up truck. They afford participants enormous flexibility in scheduling, and are solidly based on circumventing the requirements of the formal economy, since this work is done "under the table," and is, therefore, not taxed, nor does it disqualify one from collecting benefits. The informal economy overlaps into the school since faculty and staff are seen as (and, indeed, are) a viable market. Two examples of such trade provide an idea of how this system operates.

One day a teacher who also works at a local tavern brought a large box of brand-name leather ski gloves into the faculty room. The price, $4.00, was marked on the side of the box in crayon. These are gloves which sell for up to $50 retail, and which can be bought at the near-by factory outlets for $10.00 - $20.00 She explained that Dave O'Connell, a local free-lance "contractor," was selling them in the bar, and thought the teachers might be interested. There was some cheerful banter about Dave, known by just about everyone there, and considerable speculation that the

gloves were "hot." Before the end of the day, every pair was sold.

Another teacher contracted with a local man, Tom Green, to have some trees removed from her yard. When he failed to show up on the appointed day, she was not surprised to find the reason was truck problems, since this is a common cause of changed plans in the north country, where weather and poverty combine to make vehicular performance unpredictable. When the truck was fixed, he said he'd be there "Friday, for sure." Friday came and went with no sign of the man or his tree-cutting partner, Bobby. This time she was surprised when she called to find out what had happened to them. Tom told her that when he set up the appointment he forgot that Friday was Bobby's birthday. The birthday celebration took precedence over the tree job, which was finally completed the following week.

Reliance on Family

The importance of family in the economic network of places like Somerville cannot be overestimated. The certainty of growing up to work in his father's gas station prompted a third grader to tell the remedial reading teacher he wouldn't be needing to learn about paragraphs. Years later, he dropped out of high school, and went to work in the service station.

The words of R.K., who dropped out of school after having trouble fulfilling graduation requirements, express a common local view of what is really required in life and of the importance of family in helping one get work. R.K. works for his

father putting vinyl siding on houses.

R.K.: And the way I look at it is, if I'm not in school and I'm making money, that's gotta be a plus somewhere. Cause I'm making money. And whatever you're gonna do, it doesn't matter how much schooling you get, you always gotta have money. And you always gotta at least get by. You're gonna have a family. Your family has gotta have money. You gotta have a house for your wife and your kids, you know, that's kind of the way I look at it. I don't know. But, when you think about it, school is necessary, but I'm doing fine right now, cause I don't have no schooling, but I have my dad, so I probably wouldn't be doing much without my dad, you know.

D.B.: Has finding work been a problem for you?

R.K.: Well it's been a problem. You know, well she's always on my case, (gestures toward his mother in the next room) because I'm always lazy. Get out of bed, this, that and the other thing. But I work with my dad; it's good. If I get out of bed a half hour late or something, I'll just go direct to the job. He doesn't really say much. But that isn't really good for like the training part. You know, like trying to get prepared, that isn't very good.

When he mentions the "training part," R.K. is alluding to the importance of learning independence and responsibility. He also says "school is necessary," but it is clear that, for him, school hasn't been necessary, and that the requirement for getting the job he has was simply being a family member. This connection even allows him to avoid the requirement of getting to work on time.

Standards and Requirements in Schooling

Educational standards and requirements are set by the Federal and state governments, by school districts, and by teachers themselves. Schools and teachers must meet standards

and requirements of content. Students are expected to measure up to performance standards. They may take the form of test scores, units of study, or specific task completion. The Williamstown High school, where Somerville sends its students, offers the option of earning a NY State Regents diploma, which requires a fixed number of credits with various sequence options, or a local diploma, with considerably fewer units of study required. School records and interviews with the guidance counselor revealed that the majority of Somerville students opt for a regents program upon entering ninth grade, but later shift to the local diploma program. ("Well...it's a lot less work.") At the Somerville School, state requirements have a significant impact in the area of assessment, particularly at the middle school level, where the effect extends into the curriculum.

Schooling, Standards, and Literacy Instruction

Somerville teachers express a practical concern with assessment, whereby student achievement is measured against particular standards, by separating the "mandated" from the "useful." In their view, useful assessment is ongoing in the form of classroom performance evaluation, homework evaluation, student writing samples, teacher observation of student behaviors, and class test scores (grades). Mandated assessment takes the form of California Achievement Tests given at the end of each school year in every grade, and the NY State Pupil Evaluation Tests (PEP tests) and Program Evaluation Tests (PET tests) required in grades 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 as follows: reading

(cloze passages) in grades 3, 6, and 8; science in grade 4, writing (2 tasks - one creative and one factual) in grade 5,and (3 tasks - business letter, report from notes, and essay, often persuasive discourse) in grade 8; social studies in grades 6 and 8; and math in grades 3 and 6. The distinction between the PEP and PET tests has become somewhat blurred, as the original stated purpose of the Pupil Evaluation (PEP) Tests was to screen for students who needed extra help, however if students scored below the established reference point, indicating such need, the school and program were written up in the news media as needing reform, failing to meet "state standards." This practice has been stopped, but the resentment and confusion it engendered remain. The percentage of students falling below the state reference point in certain years becomes part of the state aid formula, sending extra money to schools where students do poorly on the PEP tests. (Good news/bad news)

Elementary School

It seems that at the elementary level in Somerville the interaction between reading and writing instruction and literary experiences is only minimally influenced by testing requirements. The third grade teacher expresses frustration with the state reading test, because "passages are unfamiliar, boring, and deal with totally foreign subject matter. Real reading relies heavily on prior knowledge." The sixth grade test seems to fit the same description. One must wonder whether the attempt to create tests which eliminate the effects of prior knowledge, interests, and

preferences, doesn't result in passages which challenge the determination of less motivated students and which impair the ability of less able students to keep their attention and efforts focused on the task. This is done, of course, in the pursuit of a measurable standard.

Middle School

At the middle school level there is more evidence of curriculum being shaped by requirements, not only of testing, but of the upcoming transition to the high school. Lesson plans for writing instruction focus on the types of tasks to be tested on the Preliminary Competency Exams: business letters, reports, persuasive discourse, personal narrative. It is significant that persuasive discourse is the most difficult for these students to master, according to the English teacher.

> Ms.L.: We do lots of practice on persuasive discourse. They always have trouble with the idea of supporting your argument with specific reasons, say three good reasons. They just want to say we should do this "because I want to,... because I think it's a good idea...because I think it would be good," or "It's nice."

The teacher suggests that this may be a function of age, since young teenagers are notoriously self-centered. This may be compounded by class/cultural factors, however, since building an argument relies on using the principles of "elaborated code," (Bernstein, 1964) and on a shared understanding that facts are more convincing than opinions. It is possible that local cultural norms may dictate the opposite (Heath, 1983).

Literature is taught with careful attention to the

orientation of Somerville students, including an awareness on the part of the teacher that required (canon) readings and literary analysis may be anathema to many of them.

Ms. L.: I've spent a lot of time and worked very hard to (have books) with problems they can relate to, like doing poorly in school, problems at home, feelings of teenagers, etc. They have to experience reading a whole book and knowing what it says before they can go on to deal with analysis. Just learning to respond to literature on a simple level is the best preparation we can give them. Let them deal with the "classics" in high school. At this point, I'll do anything to avoid turning them off to literature.

There are study guide questions for each chapter and the students are supposed to read on their own and come to class prepared to discuss the questions. At the end of the book, there is a test with lots of detailed short answer questions (multiple choice or fill-in) and essay questions dealing with theme, setting, character development, etc. At least five or six weeks are spent on each complete work, going through everything together in class, so that those who don't do the required reading can keep up.

Ms. L.: We discuss extensively, so they could actually get it without really reading it. We also do projects in groups where the better readers can help the poor readers along.

Most of the teachers at Somerville report some difficulty in getting students to complete and turn in homework assignments. According to the remedial reading teacher, the majority of students sent for help are failing principally because they don't do the required homework. Middle school teachers have

established an in-school homework period in an attempt to alleviate this problem, but, even closely monitored, some students manage to avoid the work.

High School

The homework problem is exacerbated by the transition to the high school, where a larger student body precludes the kind of individual attention of which Somerville is proud. The guidance counselor at Williamstown pinpointed the need for student independence, motivation, and responsibility in completing schoolwork as the chief problem of Somerville students who experienced difficulties or failed to complete school.

D.B.: What do you see as the major barrier to success in school and/or work for kids from Somerville?

GUIDO: You know, when they come from up there, that's a real small place and they get a lot of individual attention. Everybody knows everybody, every teacher knows every kid. We have 670 kids 9-12 here at WHS. Teachers have maybe 150 students to get to know and to be honest, it takes a little while. We're pretty far into the year before they really get to know each kid that well, and I mean they're loaded...they're busy. So they'll tell the kids once or twice what the assignment is, and they'll give a kid extra help if he asks for it, but they're not gonna chase 'em. And these kids aren't used to that.

D.B. So they're pretty much on their own, I mean they need to take the initiative to be responsible for themselves...

GUIDO: Yeah...

Asked about the fact that the major source of trouble for students who failed to graduate on time seemed to be social studies, he said:

GUIDO: (nods) That's because ...you know the social studies program is run by Bob Polk, and he does these... what he calls

long range assignments. When I first came here, I thought "What the hell is he doing that for?" I mean it's so much work and the kids hate it. But the longer I've been here, I've come to understand why he does it. It forces the kids to read the newspaper. It forces them to go to the library. It forces them to attend a city council meeting and see how local government works. But it's a lot of work, and some of 'em just can't stick with it. They don't want to, and to them, they don't have to.

He has captured the fact that some kids have the sense that just because it's required doesn't mean they have to do it. The disdain many Somerville youth feel for required schoolwork and for those who require it was expressed most vehemently by 17 year old M.A. He was working as a gas station attendant and mechanic's helper, having dropped out of an alternative school where he was sent in an attempt to prevent his quitting school. I asked him why he quit.

M.A.: They pissed me off with the homework. So I said, "The hell with you. I'm gonna do what I want." And I am. (Gestures toward the garage bay.)

D.B.: What was it about the homework?

M.A.: *Too much!* That's the whole idea of alternative school. They're not supposed to give you as much homework, but the teachers at BP are a bunch of assholes. They don't care. They just pile it on. *Pile* it on. I didn't have time to do anything *I* want to do. I mean, I go to school all day. I don't need that responsibility to go home at night and do more. *They want to take up all of your time. I got other things I want to do.*

At the alternative school, students only attend classes every other week, and they are placed in jobs during the intervening weeks. Clearly, this student, like those described by MacLeod, rejects the achievement ideology characteristic of schooling, even in alternative settings, and shares the view held by many

blue-collar families that the work of schooling should be confined to the school day (Lareau, 1989).

PART III CONCLUSION

Source of Conflict

Different views of standards and requirements provide fertile ground for conflict, both in school and at work. The source of conflict is at least twofold. First, there is the tendency for resistance, noted by Willis, MacLeod, and others, when working class people come up against the expectations of authorities. Requirements perceived as set in place by "others" especially others from the dominant class, are likely to be rejected, seen as unreasonable demands aimed at controlling one's time and efforts. Second, people in hard-pressed areas like Somerville have a different vision of possibilities and necessities. Their life experience helps them develop a keen sense of how little is truly necessary or "required." Practical logic dictates that time not be wasted on things seen as unnecessary, even when those things are required by school authorities or those in the hierarchical organization of the formal economic sector.

Standards not met and requirements not fulfilled represent a schism between authorities' expectations and participant outcomes. Disparity between expectations and outcomes produces

conflict between those directly involved and invites conjecture on the part of educational researchers and social scientists. Authorities may attribute the failure to laziness and misplaced priorities, while sympathetic, interested observers cite lack of skills, language differences, insufficient knowledge of how to navigate through "the system," or underfunding of schools. These explanations, both the critical and the supportive, presume rather universal acceptance of an achievement ideology, and of the desirability of using school success as an avenue of social and economic mobility.

Challenging Mainstream Assumptions

The mainstream view of the role of standards and requirements in school and in work is closely tied with the notion of competition implicit in achievement ideology. It is based on anticipation of the climb up through hierarchical ranks of social mobility and job-career arrangements, where credentials and performance standards are the name of the game. This is in direct contrast to the non-hierarchical structure of work and social arrangements in places like Somerville which stress control of one's time and resources, importance of place and family network, and the ability to adapt to shifting situations.

This local value system is reflected in many ways at the Somerville School, where extra-curricular participation operates under what might be called a "policy of inclusion." An

elementary student asked about "try-outs" for the basketball team and was told that "kids don't try out here. All they have to do is sign up. Everyone who goes out for it makes the team." Because of both small numbers and strong traditions, just about all activities include all interested children. Every child who wants to join the band or chorus is accepted. On Saturdays in winter the local alpine ski mountain has for years hosted a recreational ski program for Somerville students. Equipment and lift tickets are purchased with a combination of town and school funds, so that any child can participate. They avoid the usual requirement of owning equipment or having enough money to rent equipment and buy a lift ticket, fulfilling instead the simple requirement of being a community member. End of the year awards ceremonies at the school feature far more awards given for belonging to teams, being helpful, trying hard, and the like than for quantifiable academic achievement. Aimed at promoting self-esteem and solidarity, such a system fits well with the egalitarian spirit of the community, but does little to prepare local children for a wider world where failure to meet standards means being cut from the ranks. Somerville children encounter this in high school. They drop out.

Implications for School Improvement

There has been very little improvement in the school achievement of "at risk" students despite almost two decades of

legislation and funding for compensatory and special education programs (Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Chubb, 1988; McGill-Franzen, 1987). More broadly, policies and programs aimed at lifting poor people out of poverty through education and at improving the quality of our nation's workforce by raising academic skill level requirements have not been very successful. They are often based on widely-held assumptions which do not appear to hold true in the communities where they are applied. In poor communities, school learning is less important in terms of job preparation than conventional wisdom would indicate, while the realities of the local job market play an important and under-recognized role in preparing families and students for schooling. There can be no doubt that there is a powerful relationship between the orientations adopted by working-class children and the work experience of their families (Carnoy & Levin, Heath, Lareau)

Before school reform can address the needs of educationally and economically disadvantaged students, there must be a radical rethinking of such notions as success and equal opportunity, and of the relationship between schooling and work. We must also take a realistic look at the American economy. Do we want schools to serve a society in which everyone competes for a small number of highly-placed occupations, featuring advanced degrees and expensive lifestyles? Or do we envision schools serving a diverse society in which a broad majority has a chance to carve out a decent life based on high employment with most wages above the poverty level?

It is not enough to construe equality of opportunity as acceptance of and compensation for differing backgrounds in pursuit of mainstream educational and career goals built upon a system of fixed standards and requirements. Nor is it useful to pursue "equality of outcomes" in the narrow sense that it has come to be understood. By emphasizing equivalent performance on standardized tests and identical attainment along an educational outcome yardstick, we seem to strive only for sameness. Individuals need to be able to follow different paths to different destinations. Equality of opportunity and outcome should be about equal success in getting there. Schools must be allowed to help diverse groups of Americans to pursue their own goals, based on values and purposes which have meaning for them, acknowledging the true requirements of their real-life situations.

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